

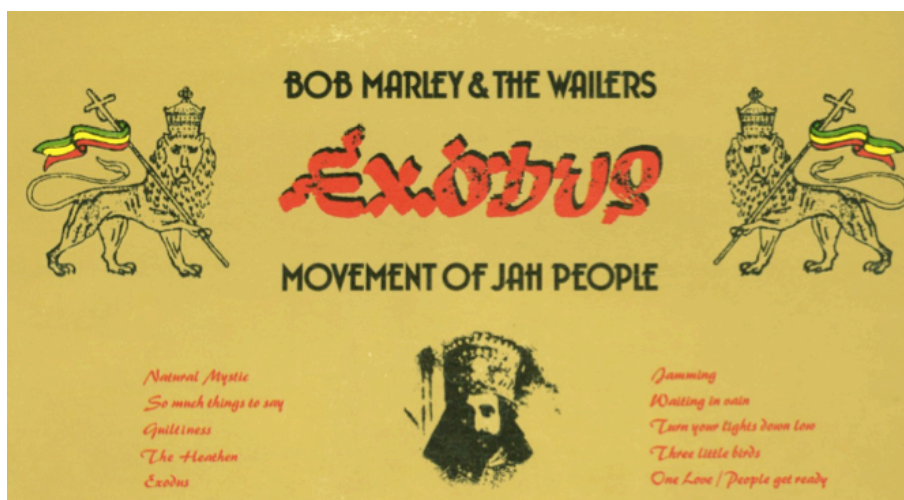


## ‘I Thought We Were Making Progress’ or Why No ‘Let My People Go’?

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A liberation reading of Exodus sees a sacred narrative of struggle and triumph for distressed social groups. Slaves are liberated from a despotic ruling authority and given land and a code of peoplehood. The afterlife of this biblical narrative galvanized countless groups in their struggles for freedom. Where does Ridley Scott’s *Exodus* stand in this revolutionary tradition?

Exodus is a “movement of the people,” as Bob Marley sang in “Exodus,” on what Time magazine called the best album of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Well, Marley actually said “movement of Jah people,” and this is important. Jah people are not just any people. Jah people are Rastafari, an Ethiopian Hebrew political movement seeking an end to British rule. Though Exodus did propel him to international fame, Bob Marley was not offering a global vision for all humanity.



To be a story about an Exodus people, we need a sense for the details, of a people embedded in specific oppressions and mobilized by unifying hope for a life of freedom. Jamaican Rastafari worked for an end to British

colonization. Bob Marley sang to lift Jamaicans out of post-colonial poverty and violence. One need only scratch the surface of an Exodus afterlife to unleash a flood of specifics: from medieval uprisings in the Netherlands, to William Bradford’s early pilgrimage speeches, to slave songs in Antebellum America, to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s liberation theology in Latin America,

to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement. Exodus discourses galvanized people in each of these settings. The liberation in Exodus is never just a shell of a story – it becomes enfleshed by “the people.”

But a shell we got. Ridley Scott’s *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, did not deliver on Exodus’s history of revolutionary interpretations. Putting a sword in Moses’s hand and portraying him as a war general for the Israelites was good Hollywood spectacle, but it did little to give the film a burning sense of purpose. Slavery was a backdrop for the film. Instead of highlighting the struggle for freedom with narrative drama or device, enslavement was represented flatly. Scott’s interest lay in the dynamics between Ramses and Moses, the relationship between Moses and the child-God, and in the digital prowess to portray the plagues as biological warfare against the state. The Hebrew slaves walked through the biblical plot elements with unconvincing passion.

Instead, Scott managed to turn Exodus into a confusing meditation on state power. *Exodus: God and Kings* delivered on its name. We never even heard the line: “Let my people go.”

To be sure, the biblical Exodus offers a meditation on power, but with clear and uncompromising results: pharaonic kings are not cosmic. Only YHWH could lay such claims on human beings. To make this point, the biblical story begins inside the logic of pharaonic rule and unworks the grip of Egyptian power. Egypt runs on both political and cosmic force. Hierarchical institutions program millions of daily oppressions in what becomes everyday life. But cosmic forces hold the system in place: sages, seers, divine kings, statues, rituals...all the paraphernalia of power achieve supernatural heft. Hierarchy is ritualized. Oppressions are normalized. Power is mythologized. And the pharaoh achieves apotheosis. Faith is shorthand for compliance. And all the people sleep for 400 years “without progress.” Scott got most of that right – but he failed to make anything of it.

Scott took the very interesting fact of Moses’s dual identity, born Hebrew and bred into Egyptian royal pedigree. But he dramatized it as Moses’s persistent struggle for self-understanding. Moses never succeeds in leaving behind the logic of pharaonic power. In fact, [Moses has been recast](#) so dramatically that some will not recognize him at all.

He doesn't even have a [stammer](#), a disability that enables the Bible's critique of pharaonic power. Ridley Scott's leader fits a royal ideal by comparison. And indeed, Scott's Moses does not kill an Egyptian taskmaster. This moment of rage catalyzes Moses's journey into solidarity with the cause of the Hebrew people.

"There have been 400 years of real suffering. You didn't pay attention," God returns, as Moses vexes over the suffering of "his people." But he doesn't mean the Hebrews in this scene. "It's just hard to watch the people I grew up with suffer," says Moses, who still carries the sword of fraternal allegiance to Ramses.

Moses's empathy seems [exemplary](#). He cares about all people, both Egyptian and Israelite. Especially true in the last plague, Moses offers woeful and plaintive resistance to God's intentions: "I want them to suffer." Moses is distraught. Indeed, this is one of the most distressing details of the biblical story. God's slaughter of the Egyptian children in Exodus resembles none other than Herod's slaughter of the innocents in the story of Jesus's birth (cf., Matt 2:16-18). Cast in sympathy, Ramses offers the regular bedtime prayer for his son as an enshrinement blessing: "Sleep so well because you know you are loved." Moses seems genuinely concerned when he warns Ramses of the coming slaughter.



But Moses does not give Ramses the instructions for the blood ritual that would have saved his son. Instead, Moses warns of the danger to "thousands and thousands of citizens...This is about Egypt's survival," he says. Moses is apparently more concerned with the propagation of the citizen state than he is with the

lives inside it.

The film never dissembles the logic of pharaonic power. Moses never truly abdicates his sword. Meanwhile, Egyptian sages recommend redistribution of food rations somewhere in and

in and around the seventh plague. When Ramses vetoes, the Egyptian police violently protect food storages from hungry rioters and looters. And yet, just a few scenes before, Moses, confused, states, "I thought we were making progress."

Leaving out Moses's famous cry, "Let my people go" puts Ridley Scott's *Exodus* in robust but perhaps less well-known tradition of establishment interpretations. Exodus is the very narrative of the American state, whose official seal almost read: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." The American pilgrims came to America on the hopes of crossing a sea and would eventually write a constitution to live in freedom as a New Israel. Exodus was used to signify the birth story of our modern republic. Now fully established, the nation continues to generate Exodus rhetoric. Americans hear Exodus references in nearly every election cycle. It was even summoned by both sides of the Civil War. As African slaves were penning liberation songs, leaders in the Confederate states enjoined Exodus rhetoric to justify their national aspirations.

Ridley Scott's *Exodus* makes more sense when seen in the establishment tradition. Is this film about the twinge of nostalgia Westerners feel for a period of stronger national power? Is it about clutching to what remains of the American myth of progress? Whatever it is, it is not a movement of the people. It is an unimaginative, indeed non-visionary reflection on nationalism, on Gods and Kings. It is fitting that it ended in the wilderness.

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